

Last week, I took tour of an oyster sanctuary in the Patuxent River to see how efforts are working to restore the population of this critical shellfish in our waters. I was also present when the sanctuary was laid five years ago, and I must report that I was very impressed with the progress we are making and give great credit to the Oyster Recovery Partnership for coordinating this important effort in our state.

The Chesapeake Bay, which means "great shellfish bay," was historically marked by high abundances of oysters that were able to filter the water in a period of three days. Unfortunately, due to disease, pollution, low dissolved oxygen levels and overharvesting, oyster populations are only about one percent of their levels just a century ago.

Maryland has an economic, environmental and cultural stake in restoring the once plentiful oyster population. Oysters improve water quality by filtering Bay water, which allows other vital organisms to thrive. And it is no secret that a healthy ecosystem is the key to the livelihood of our state's watermen and our overall economy.

Since 1994, a coordinated effort headed up by the Oyster Recovery Partnership has been put into place to attempt to restore the oyster population. The Partnership's mission is to work to create both managed harvest reserves and oyster sanctuaries that will provide a fresh supply of oysters for the watermen and the entire oyster industry infrastructure: shucking houses, businesses that serve harvesters and processors, and restaurants.

The oyster reef structures that will be created thanks to this effort will provide critical habitat and feeding grounds for other essential species, and will also serve as natural filters screening out algae, sediments, and pollutants. Last year, under the Partnership's management, the more than 35 million new oysters were planted in the Patuxent River, and since 2000, the Oyster Recovery Partnership has planted over 2 billion oysters at 60 locations in the Bay.

The federal government has been a steady supporter of these projects recognizing the great value that a healthy and thriving oyster population provides to the economy and the environment. Since 1999, I have led the effort in the House of Representatives to secure nearly \$45 million in federal funding to restore the oyster population in the Chesapeake Bay and I will continue to advocate on behalf of this important initiative.

Other efforts include legislation signed by Governor O'Malley in 2007 creating the Maryland Oyster Advisory Commission charged with seeking new strategies to rebuild the Bay's oyster population, created new penalties for violating existing oyster regulations, and established greater opportunity for private investment in oyster restoration.

In June 2009, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources announced that it was expanding its "Maryland Grow Oysters" program to a total of 12 sites, including the Patuxent, Wicomico and St. Mary's Rivers. The program provides oyster spat in cages to local associations who identify volunteer pier owners to locate them. The resulting oysters will be planted on reefs.

The Oyster Recovery Project is undertaken jointly by the Oyster Recovery Partnership (a non-profit that coordinates the efforts of the government agencies, environmentalists and waterman), the Army Corps of Engineers, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the University of Maryland's Center for Environmental Sciences. For more information, visit: [www.oysterrecovery.org](http://www.oysterrecovery.org).